

ROBERTS: LAURENCE BERNARD

Known as Laurie

Born: 5 March 1910, Wellington, New Zealand

Married: 1935, to Ruby May Shephard
b. 7 December 1912 – d. 4 June 1997

Died: 21 August 1998, Levin, New Zealand

Buried at: The Avenue Cemetery, Levin

Honours

1985: Member of the British Empire (MBE)
for services to the community

Laurie and Ruby had 1 son:

Michael: b. 3 December 1940, lives in Queensland, Australia

Laurie's parents were:

Walter Vivian Roberts

and

Annie Marion (nee O'Reilly)

Laurie had 3 younger siblings:

William

Noeline

Shirley

Early Life

Laurie was born on 5 March 1910 in Wellington. A brother and two sisters followed. When Laurie was 8 or 9, the family moved to Dannevirke, then shortly after to Kaikohe. His father Walter was a cabinetmaker, joiner and builder who found plenty of work building shops and houses there.

At age 13 or 14 Laurie attended Whangarei Grammar as a boarder for two years. But in the depressed post-World War I times, his father could no longer afford to keep him there with a wife and three other children to

provide for. So, it was off to work for Laurie, very tough work - two years working for the Taupo Totorā Timber Company in the kauri forests out of Kaikohe, assisting with the bullock teams. It's been said that his lifelong strong affinities with manual workers and his tendencies towards profanities were formed during this time.

At 16 years of age, his Irish mother Annie put her foot down firmly, arranging and assisting Laurie to join the New Zealand Railways. He had an excellent IQ and she knew he was wasting himself in the bush.

Laurie duly joined the NZR and was transferred to Wellington where he was trained as a telephonist – that was a morse code sender and receiver. With training and proficiency, he was transferred to many North Island railway stations for the next few short years.



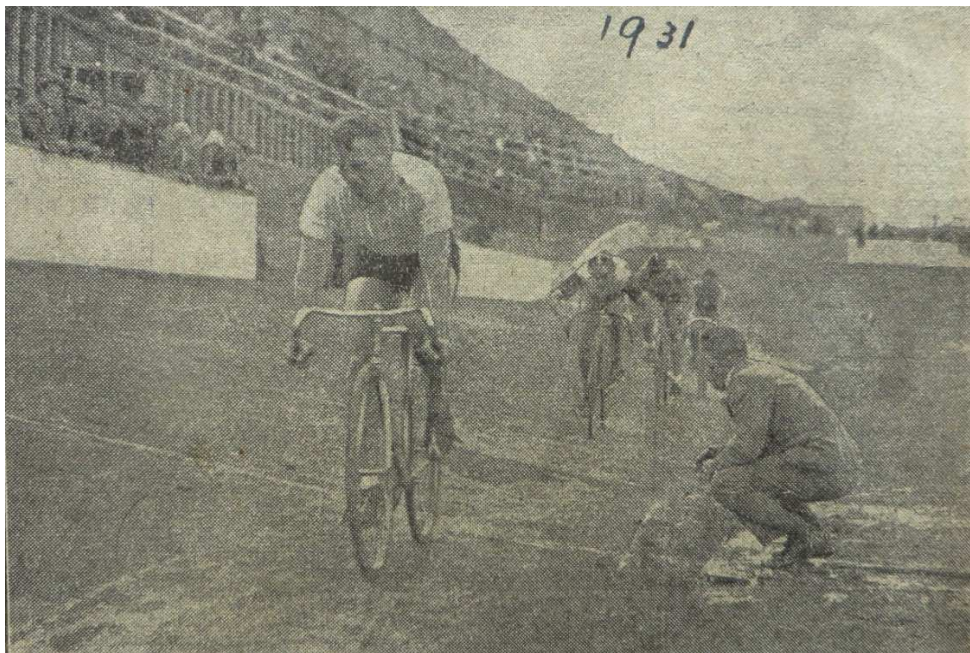
As a young man, in Lower Hutt (Laurie's personal photo collection)

Laurie's sporting career

Initially, Laurie took up the sport of boxing but soon turned his interests to cycle racing. It was a sport that attracted intense public interest in those days, with big attendances at track carnivals and road races. Joining Auckland's Manukau Club in 1928, he was immediately competitive in road events, regularly scoring high placings and being made to start from scratch in handicap races. He also raced in track meetings at Western Springs Stadium.

His work transfer to Wellington led him into the Port Nicholson Club. At this time, there was a great deal of frustration in the cycling fraternity

that their sport was administratively controlled by the New Zealand Amateur Athletics Association and national track championships were held on grass ovals in conjunction with the athletics championships. This, along with other disputes, resulted in a breakaway group calling itself the New Zealand Union of Cyclists holding its own cycling-only national championships on a new hard-track velodrome at the Winter Show Grounds in Wellington in 1931. The star of that show was Laurie Roberts, who won both the half-mile and one-mile national titles and finished third in the three miles. He also had a clearcut victory in a one-lap challenge race.



**Victory in the NZ half-mile track championship, Wellington 1931
(Photo: C P S Boyer)**

These would be the single most successful set of results of his career, although he continued racing throughout the 1930s and was regularly among the place-getters in both road and track events. He twice won the prestigious annual Laykold Cup 5-mile track race at Petone in 1932 and 1934.



**A comprehensive victory in the 5-mile Laykold Cup, Petone, 1934
(Laurie's personal photo collection)**

Of particular local interest, Laurie raced at the Levin Domain track during this time, taking three second placings at a Napier Earthquake Relief carnival on 4 March 1931, and returning a fortnight later to win the 1-lap invitation match race at an open carnival.

In 1932, continuing disarray in the national administration of cycling meant no valid trials were held in New Zealand for the upcoming Olympic Games in Los Angeles, so in-form riders like Laurie never had an opportunity to reach qualifying standards to be considered for selection. New Zealand was represented in cycling for the first time though, in the road race, with a single entrant, Ron Foubister.

Laurie continued racing until 1939 and competed as a professional in his final season.

Journalism and World War II

Laurie had an intense interest in the English language, both written and spoken, and from early in his NZ Railways employment he found time to take correspondence courses in journalism, publishing and advertising. He wrote sports write ups, mainly about cycling, for magazines and newspapers including the then '*NZ Sport Life*' using the pseudonym "PEDDLES".

During this time, it appears (from the caption accompanying the photo below), that he was based in Lower Hutt when he met Ruby Shephard, whom he married in 1935.



Ruby and 'Gip' at 607 High St. Lower Hutt, 1936 (from Laurie's personal photo album)

He had applied for and been transferred to the NZ Railways publicity magazine where he ended up as an assistant publicity manager, having attained qualifications in all the subject areas he'd been studying. He became a father in December 1940, when Ruby gave birth to their only child, Michael.

In 1942 he was drafted into the New Zealand Army, and recruited into a select section named the 'Ruahine Intelligence' (perhaps a unit within the Intelligence Corps attached to the Ruahine Regiment, where his telephonist training would have been of instant value). A group of about eight men were shipped to New Caledonia, the Solomons, and North Solomon Islands, tracking down the enemy at close quarters. Unscathed, he returned to be discharged from the army in late 1945. After being demobilized Laurie was greeted with the news that a very grateful New Zealand Government had seen fit not to have his former job waiting for him!

Laurie the drainlaying contractor

He was placed in a government scheme then called 'Manpower' that retrained returned servicemen and women. Here he picked up the skills to the trade of drain-laying and, with an extremely high IQ, was soon chasing work on the huge state housing developments of Taita and Naenae in the Hutt Valley, tendering successfully to maintain a continuity of work. He took full advantage of the government-funded rehabilitation

finance scheme, promptly acquiring a Ford Model A pickup truck. To add to his qualifications, he took correspondence courses in structured concrete work.

From now on, he had no shortage of work, and prosperity began to follow. Added to his tendering ability, Laurie won wide respect for the very high standard of workmanship he produced in those immediate post-World War II building boom years in the lower part of the North Island.

His arrival in Levin

In 1949 Laurie learned of the approved scheme to install a complete sewerage system into Levin. He and Ruby sold their home in Trentham and in March that year moved up to base his business here.

When, in 1951, Levin Borough Council called for tenders for the sewage treatment plant to be constructed at the western end of Mako Mako Road, Laurie won the contract and completed it with a small gang of local skilled tradesmen overseen by the consultant engineers Vickerman and Lancaster of Wellington. While this work was in progress, he continued chasing and winning other concrete and drainage work in the immediate district with another band of local workers, favouring as much as possible returned servicemen.

Laurie tendered for all 4 phases of the ongoing instalment of the town's street-by-street sewerage system. He was awarded a modest share in stage 1, along with Levin's Ken Douglas to excavate the trenches, and De Bernado of Tawa Flat to lay the sewer pipes and construct the manholes. Then Laurie succeeded in taking over the whole contract for stages 2 and 3. It's remembered that he and his son Michael did much of this work themselves with a single mechanical digger.

A considerable project, it was undertaken during one of the local council's most turbulent eras, 1953 to 1956, when the mayor, Horace Herring, a registered engineer, constantly clashed with his council over every detail of the sewerage scheme, technical and financial. But none of this kept Laurie from laying the pipes.

The Laurie Roberts Cycle Track

Another project that clung close to his heart was the construction of a new banked cycle track at the Levin Domain, a venue he had competed at during the 1930s. It was now the early 1960s, and Laurie approached Wally Wise, who had replaced Herring as mayor, with an offer to build a new track at no cost to the council.

The existing flat, sealed-surface oval, dating back to 1923, had been encroached on by the Domain's new grandstand along the Bath Street boundary (while the old stand had flanked the other, northern side of the track).

The new track would have to be fully relocated several metres northwards, with by-now-customary banked curves. Laurie built these up using surplus spoils from his other contracts between 1961 and 1963, with the final spoil coming from excavations to create Horowhenua College's swimming pool!

Once completed, it was an amenity of a standard to attract both provincial and national track cycling championships to the town. When the Levin Amateur Athletic and Cycling Club celebrated its golden jubilee with a carnival at the Domain in January 1969, attended by Olympic athletes like Peter Snell and Sylvia Potts, the honour of cutting the ribbon to launch the occasion was given to Laurie, then in his first term as a borough councillor.

GOLDEN JUBILEE MEETING OF LEVIN ATHLETIC AND CYCLING CLUB

A GOLD RIBBON across the track at the Levin Park Domain will be cut on Saturday.

It will herald the start of the first event of the Levin Athletic and Cycling Club's Golden Jubilee meeting that day.

The first event will be a cycle race, and an invitation to have the honour of cutting the ribbon will be extended to Mr L. B. (Laurie) Roberts.

One of Levin's new borough councillors, Laurie, when living in Wellington, rode here in cycling events in the 1920s. He was regarded as one of the best of his day.

Since he has been living in Levin, Mr Roberts has proved a very generous benefactor to the club.

A programme of events featuring noted athletes and cyclists, including two who represented New Zealand at the Empire Games in Mexico, is planned for Saturday. It commences at 1.45pm.

• PETER SNELL TO ATTEND

years, 90 per cent have gone north.

Saturday's jubilee celebrations are expected to bring many back to Levin for the weekend. For the club it is the climax of months of planning.

The most difficult part has been compiling lists of names and addresses, as records of the club were lost from the years before 1940.

Only due to the fact that some people have kept programmes and other souvenirs has it been possible to contact many of the competitors of other days.

Over 200 have already registered for the jubilee dinner, which will be held in the Ohau Hall on Saturday night. Admission will be by ticket only.

The master of ceremonies will be Mr L. G. King, mayor

The jubilee cake will be cut by the club's three life members—Mr Cyril Batten and a brother and sister, Mr G. Milroy and Mrs M. Dorne. All three have been connected with the club since the early 1930s.

• AMONG PAST COMPETITORS

It is not possible to list all the names of past competitors who will be coming on Saturday, but included will be Bill Wards, who was connected with the club back in 1925. Others in the 1920s will be Charlie Curtis (Napier), Mrs Venie Doyle (Levin), Sandy and Bill Greig (Levin), Mr and Mrs A. S. Hunter (Wairarapa), Frank Green (Petone), M. Stallard (Palmerston



MR L. B. ROBERTS . . . will cut the tape.

Morgan, Frank Blackett, George King, Tommy George, H. J. Wehipeihana, Pat Doyle, Joe Allan, Mrs Mavis Ward (formerly Miss Batten), Hemi Warren, Mrs Ethel Mackie (formerly Miss Hocking), Bill Batten and many more.

The event will prove a great

It's therefore not surprising that this durable sports facility was eventually renamed the 'Laurie Roberts Cycle Racing Track' in honour of all his work. That was in 1998, on 17 February that year to be precise!

His ongoing drainage and subdivision work, some being developments in his own right, continued across the district until he sold his business to another local contracting firm and retired in 1966.

Borough Councillor and Mayor

In 1968, Laurie was approached by a group of local residents who persuaded him to be nominated for council. He was voted in and in March 1969 was appointed the council's representative on the Horowhenua Lake Domain Board. In 1971, in a four-way contest that included the incumbent Claude Fuller, Laurie won the mayoral race, and would go on to serve three terms until 1980.



His first public address as mayor was to be at the opening of the new town centre shopping complex, the Mall, which had been vaunted as a means to halt Levin's ribbon development. But he deferred the honour of the official opening to his predecessor Fuller, during whose terms, and those of Wally Wise, the development had come about.

The 1970s was a decade in which business thrived in Levin, there was much vitality in the voluntary sector, strong independent minds populated the council chamber and Laurie's own energies and wide-ranging capabilities ensured a 'can-do' attitude prevailed. He was re-elected unopposed in 1974 and 1977.

Stormwater reticulation was a key focus for him. Regular flooding in low-lying areas was a constant reminder that open water races were no longer sufficient to cope with run-off in this fast-growing town.

Laurie's contacts through the Lake Domain Board helped him reach an agreement with the Lake Trustees in 1971 that cleared the way for a loan-financed underground reticulation scheme to be implemented.

His forthright representation on the National Roads Board resulted in an upgrading of Levin's main streets.

During a period when the national government was trying to bring in new policies to simplify local government, Laurie, in league with other local body leaders, was emphatic that neither Wellington's nor Manawatu's designs on absorbing this region into their spheres would be tolerated. He persuaded Horowhenua County Council, and Levin, Otaki and Kapiti Borough Councils to reject both schemes and form their own region. By December 1977, an interim Horowhenua United Council was in place that led to the recognition of a separate Horowhenua region to control its own planning, civil defence and libraries.

The interests of cultural development were equally supported by Laurie, most prominently displayed in the council's purchase of Dr S J Thompson's elegant two-storeyed house in Kent Street following his death, and its conversion into a community cultural centre. By 1977 a Community Arts Council was formed.

Laurie's Mayoral Demise

In 1980, Laurie fought a vigorous election campaign for a fourth term but his deputy Jack Bolderson opposed him and won comfortably. This reflected a climate of rancour in the council chamber that surfaced during Laurie's last year, with conflict growing particularly between councillors and senior council officers including the town clerk. Eventually there was a split between Laurie and Bolderson over these staff issues which led to their head-to-head in the November election.

It was a regrettable end to his nine years in office after having brought genuine vigour to the post and continuing progress to the borough. As a mayor he had some good ideas but didn't always 'sell' them well to other councillors or possibly council officers. There were no shades of grey with Laurie. Everything was black or white, either with him or against him. Tough, strong, uncompromising, intelligent and forward thinking. The public gallery of the council chamber was nearly always full, with tension aplenty especially during the meetings leading up to that 1980 election. On one occasion a police officer was stationed in the mayoral office 'just in case'.

